



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Proposed Rule for a Regulatory Amendment to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan Available for Public Review and Comments

NOAA Fisheries Service has published a proposed rule in the *Federal Register* (71 FR 16275, March 31, 2006) that, if approved, would implement actions proposed in a regulatory amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council), in cooperation with NOAA Fisheries Service, developed the regulatory amendment.

The purpose of the proposed rule is to establish management measures for the recreational grouper fishery consistent with those proposed in the regulatory amendment. These measures are intended to take the place of temporary regulations (i.e., one red grouper bag limit and November 1 – December 31, 2005 red grouper closure) implemented by NOAA Fisheries Service, which will expire July 22, 2006 (71 FR 3018, January 19, 2006). Management measures are needed to restrict recreational red grouper landings to levels specified in the rebuilding plan. These measures are also intended to prevent or minimize increases in fishing mortality on gag and other grouper resulting from any shift in fishing effort from red grouper to these species because of the more restrictive recreational red grouper regulations.

The rule proposes to: 1) Reduce the red grouper bag limit from two to one per person per day; 2) prohibit captain and crew from retaining bag limits of grouper while under charter; and 3) establish a recreational closed season for red grouper, gag, and black grouper from February 15 to March 15 each year. NOAA Fisheries Service expects a new stock assessment for gag to be completed in July 2006 that may contain new information pertinent to evaluating the need for the seasonal closure. Therefore, at the final rule stage, NOAA Fisheries Service may separate the management measures into two separate final rules -

one addressing the bag limit and captain and crew provisions, and one addressing the seasonal closure. This approach would allow the bag limit and captain and crew provisions to be implemented in a timely manner, assuming approval, and would allow NOAA Fisheries Service to defer implementation of the seasonal closure until the new gag assessment has been completed.

Addresses

The regulatory amendment, which includes a Regulatory Impact Review, Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Social Impact Assessment, and a Fishery Impact Statement, is available from:

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
2203 N. Lois Avenue
Suite 1100
Tampa, Florida 33607
Phone: 813-348-1630; fax: 813-348-1711
e-mail: gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org

Written copies of the proposed rule may be obtained from the NMFS Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701. Electronic copies of the proposed rule may be obtained from the *Federal Register* website at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>.

Comments regarding the proposed rule should be sent to Mr. Andy Strelcheck at the NMFS Southeast Regional Office at the address provided above. Comments may be submitted via fax to 727-824-5308 or by e-mail to 0648-AU04.Proposed@noaa.gov. For e-mail comments, include in the subject line the following identifier: 0648-AU04.

All comments on the proposed rule must be received before 5:00 p.m., eastern time, on May 1, 2006. All

comments received by NOAA Fisheries Service on the proposed rule will be addressed in any final rule published to implement the actions proposed in the regulatory amendment.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes. This and other news releases are available on the SERO homepage at <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

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